

The background of the page features two marble busts. The upper bust is a man's head in profile, looking downwards and to the left. The lower bust is a woman's head, also in profile, looking upwards and to the right. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures and contours of the stone.

# Speaking in Tongues

by Cay Dollerup

Language Work At The European Commission:  
Part 1



Seven years ago, shortly before Austria, Sweden and Finland joined the European Union, the impact of this political expansion of the European Union on language work was discussed during a meeting that was attended by Cay Dollerup. In the report following that meeting, Cay described that the EU translation service was considered outmoded by many.

Cay visited the European Commission again in late June 2000 and found that despite the addition of two more languages and the acceptance of three more Member States, the language services of the European institutions have risen to the challenge and are now leading in the field of language work. The European Union has shown that when the Member States make a

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united effort, they can indeed be very strong. His belated report is published in this and in the next issue of *Language International*.

### **The European Union Language Services**

There are fundamental differences between the language services of the

European Union and those of other international organizations. These differences are primarily related to the fact that where other organizations are mostly intergovernmental, the EU represents a co-operation at all levels between the Member States and the citizens. This principle is the cornerstone of the EU community, an important fact which is hardly realized by most citizens, rarely understood by middle-level administrators and national academics, occasionally by high-ranking officials in the Member States, and most often by national delegates and politicians. It is, however, ever present in the daily work of the EU institutions, above all in the language services that ensure smooth communication between the increasingly tightly-bound European nations.

Never before in human history have peoples speaking so many different languages worked so closely together in a democratic fashion at the highest administrative level. It is a collaboration that began in 1952 with the creation of the European Coal and Steel Union with six Member States and is now looking at a possible expansion from 15 to 27 Member States.

The EU bureaucracy may occasionally seem slow and infuriate both institutions and private individuals in the Member States. However, to put things in perspective, one should not forget that there are only 30,000 employees at all EU institutions combined. Most day-to-day work is carried out in a number of specialist agencies and some key institutions, such as the

European Parliament, the European Commission, and the Council of Ministers.

The language services may appear large in terms of staff since they employ one out of

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eight of the EU personnel, but actually, less than 1% of the Union's budget is set aside for language services. So, language services come relatively cheap for the Member States committed to democratic cooperation. All Member States are bound by a commitment that is included in the Treaty of Amsterdam: "Every citizen of the Union may write to any of the institutions or bodies referred to in this article, or in Article 4, in one of the languages mentioned in Article 248 [which lists the official languages] and have an answer in the same language."

In reality, none of the EU institutions are working full-time answering letters from citizens although such letters are occasionally received and answered. The language services are primarily used by the EU institutions, their staff, the ministries of the Member States, and the delegates at the daily expert and political meetings.

In this report the focus is on the language work at the Commission, not only because the Commission is the largest body in the

## **Statistics and facts**

**Total population of the European Union countries: 375 million.**

**Member States: 15 (Austria (DE), Belgium (FR/NL), Denmark (DA), Finland (FI), France (FR), Germany (DE), Greece (EL), Ireland (EN), Italy (IT), Luxembourg (FR/DE), Netherlands (NL), Portugal (PT), Spain (ES), Sweden (SE) and the United Kingdom (EN).**

**Official languages: 11: Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish. Working languages: 3: English, French, German. Speakers of non-official languages in the Member States: 40 million (e.g. Catalan and Galician (Spain), Letzeburg (Luxembourg) and Welsh (UK)).**

**Main EU institutions: The European Parliament (Brussels and Strasbourg), the European Commission (Brussels and Luxembourg), the European Court of Justice (Luxembourg) and the Council of Ministers (Main administrative seat: Brussels. Political decisions are taken by a meeting of ministers of specific areas (e.g. defense, foreign affairs, environment).**

**Total no. of staff at all institutions: 30,819 (2000), at the Commission: 21,702 (2000)**



European organization, but also because the Commission has most influence on the daily lives of European citizens. In addition, I worked as a consultant for the Commission through the University of Copenhagen in the mid-1970s and have paid regular visits since then. After another visit to the Commission for two days in June 2000 my first reaction was: THINGS HAVE DEFINITELY CHANGED!

### Interpreting

In this first part of my report, the focus is on the interpreting services. Information was provided to me by all individuals I spoke with, including Mr. N. Muylle, Mr. M. Millis, Mr. M. De Wolf, Mr. B. Fox, Mr. Saugstrup, and Ms. E. Egelund.

The Joint Interpreting and Conference Service (SCIC—Service Commun Interprétation-Conférence) provides interpreters for meetings at a number of EU bodies, such as the Commission, the Council of Ministers, the Committee of the Regions, the Economic and Social Committee, and the European Investment Bank. The EU Parliament has a separate service that also works for the Court of Justice. The SCIC has a budget of approximately 80 million euros.

### Organization and Areas of Work

The service came into being with the foundation of the Coal and Steel Union in 1952 and then included only a handful of interpreters covering the four official languages of the six states involved. It grew with the addition of new bodies such as the Economic and Social Committee and,



Mr. N. Muylle, Director for Interpretation, Training and Documentation

inevitably so, with each expansion of the originally mainly Francophone Community (1973, 1981, 1986, and 1995). Due to the increasing workloads after each expansion of the European Union, from the four languages of 1952 to the eleven of 1995, the service was reorganized in 1997.

Today, it has a permanent staff of about 460 interpreters and an additional 200–250 freelance interpreters. On average, interpreting services are required in approximately 60 meetings every day. Most of these meetings are expert meetings of working groups or permanent committees. The main emphasis is on the routine work necessary for carrying out

European initiatives and on monitoring progress and implementation.

### Modes and Languages

The SCIC Web site still lists *consecutive interpreting* as a method used at the Commission, but in fact this is used rarely. The dominant mode is *simultaneous conference interpreting* involving the use of interpreting booths. Also *whisper interpreting* is becoming more and more relevant. This is the result from the growing importance of interpreting small talk and table speeches. It also provides interpreting to visitors and delegates from nationalities that are not members of the European Union, e.g. the applicant nations and Russia, who cannot always be furnished with interpreting booths.

Since, in accordance with the regulation mentioned previously, the service does not distinguish between “minor” or “major” languages, it must primarily meet various needs as they arise. This means that delegates who only speak their native language may need assistance. Other issues may also affect decisions about offering interpreting services for a meeting. For example, a Portuguese chairman will normally count on having a Portuguese interpreter attend.

The SCIC is fully aware of the importance of maintaining high-quality interpreting services. The problem is obvious: quality becomes the prime concern when multiple languages are involved; setting up interpreting teams is normally less of a problem. The number of languages already used makes planning a challenge, and planning becomes rather unmanageable



Mr. M. Millis, Head of Unit for Documentation and Access to Documentation



when this number increases to, say, 21. A creative solution—already used on a daily basis—is that delegates may speak their own language but must listen to speeches in a foreign language they understand.

In the early years of its existence, the SCIC expected interpreters—at least after some years' experience—to interpret into their mother tongue from the three other languages. This policy of *plurilingualism* became difficult to maintain with the expansion of 1973 and slowly gave way to an acceptance of *multilingualism*, meaning basically, that individual translators and interpreters could not be expected to master all official languages.

At present, new interpreters are expected to be able to interpret from two foreign languages. In many cases, however, interpreters acquire sufficient knowledge of other languages so that these can be interpreted directly.

There is a striking increase in the demand of passive languages, which is mostly due to a continuing training program initiated in 1996. Initially, there are few interpreters who can meet the require-

ments in full, but gradually, thanks to internal courses and experience, they get to know more languages. Interpreters are

encouraged to learn additional languages, as this is a factor in promotion.

### Logistics and Knowledge Sharing

Each booth for the *active* languages at a meeting is manned by two interpreters and, when more than six languages are involved, each booth has a team of three. Except for the occasional anomaly, for example when a “minor” language booth has to interpret from the mother tongue, interpreters work into their native language only. Interpreters see the delegates from their booths or the meeting is displayed on a screen.

The interpreters were the last group to be supplied with computers, but now most are provided with laptops. As they do not have individual offices, this allows them to download their assignments for the week and check in daily for last-minute changes.

Apart from the languages commanded by the individual interpreters, there are many factors that are considered in the planning process. At meetings involving interpreting of “minor” languages, the planners assume that there is at least one interpreter in one

of the “working” language booths who can interpret *from* the minor language in order to minimize the number of relays. Other factors include, for instance, the interpreter's experience, which is indicated by colors in the planning office.

Sometimes it is also possible to consider the interpreter's subject matter expertise, such as nuclear power or agriculture, while planning. It is, however, difficult to operate with specialist teams of interpreters because they have to cover a wide variety of meetings and because unexpected topics may be discussed during meetings.

Interpreters can normally pick up reference documents the day prior to the meeting, but often meetings call

for more preparation than this. Special preparation will take place if the organizers request it, if the documentation staff finds

it necessary, or if previous teams of interpreters for the same type of meeting have indicated the need for supplementary background information. Such preparations range from 15-minute briefings before meetings begin to hours of studying documents and reports. Interpreters can consult specialized CD-ROMs, search the Web, and access the specialized glossaries and terminology lists developed by the translation services.

A new project, CERCA, aims to facilitate the interchange of information between the various language services. It is clear that interpreters should always know the topic of each meeting. For this purpose, *thematic sheets* are often available. Although interpreters can access the terminology lists from the translation services, many also create their own glossaries, mostly during meetings. These lists have varying levels of quality because conditions for creating them are not always ideal, but they are much appreciated by colleagues who thereby gain access to collective knowledge. It is pertinent that the interpreters are frequently the first language workers at the EU who are introduced to new words, problems and perspectives as they surface in the debates among the delegates.

The chef d'équipe, *i.e.* the head interpreter at a session, produces a report for each meeting. This report details, for instance, the number of participants and special features that may be useful for planning. The meeting reports may also include information from individual interpreters.

The term *documentation* is used by translators and interpreters for previously produced documents as well as background documentation and information. Both document types are dealt with differently though. Practicalities, such as handling and time, dictate that the documentation used by interpreters must be presented as papers, in a brief form, and with targeted information. For interpreters, it is essential to limit information to what is immediately relevant. The organizers of a meeting will, usually two weeks in advance, inform the Documentation Unit which documents may be needed for a session.

The interpreters' laptops are not used for document handling in the booths. The reason is that it is possible to quickly to browse from one paper document to another during the negotiations at the meetings, whereas it is more difficult to work with a large number of documents and glossaries on-screen, in particular when interpreters also have to keep an eye on the proceedings. Even electronic docu-



Mr. M. de Woy, Electronic Documentation

ments in full, but gradually, thanks to internal courses and experience, they get to know more languages. Interpreters are

C. Dollerup



ments forwarded by the organizers are first printed. The Documentation Unit will see to it that there are sufficient paper copies of the documents considered relevant for the interpreters, and that these are placed in the right order so that interpreters can pick up the packs of documents before the meeting.

The archiving of documentation is a shared effort between the interpreting and translation services. A working group is concerned with electronic archiving and the preservation of information on "traditional" media such as paper or tapes.

A short visit to an interpreting booth at a meeting already showed an important change: microphone switches are now handled automatically, which means that delegates can speak immediately. Previously, there used to be a technician in charge of the microphone switching. There was also a brief illustration of the complexity of the language work at the European Union between the delegates as producers/users and the language services. In this particular case, the German delegation voiced its criticism of the German translation in which they had found deviations in the phrasing ("Abweichungen in die Formulierungen").

## The Future

Things are changing rapidly in the EU interpreting service. Budgetary cuts normally affect travel, and the option of tele-interpreting is being examined. Summaries or extracts are generated automatically from documents and preparation for meetings becomes more automated in terms of access to glossaries, terminology resources, and reference documentation.

Any new addition(s) of Member States will affect the interpreting services and the SCIC is getting prepared for this. Permanent staff is already encouraged to learn the languages of applicant nations.

The Commission no longer provides its own interpreting courses, but still offers pedagogical assistance, supplementary grants to universities, and also study visits. Actual training courses for interpreters take place at interpreter schools in the European countries. There is an annual selection in open competition for interpreters who want to work for the Commission. Candidates must hold an academic degree and know two languages in addition to their mother tongue. The tests comprise both consecutive and simul-

taneous interpreting. The SCIC feels, however, that, the European Union universities are often not keeping in touch with them and with the new developments.

Having attended meetings and speaking with the interpreters as an outside and distant observer for a quarter of century, I can say that the advances in terms of smooth operation of meetings and professionalism at the Commission are impressive. The delegates speak out, the chairs handle meetings with excellence, and the interpreters do their jobs with ease and elegance.

Further information on SCIC can be found at [www.europa.eu.int/comm/SCIC](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/SCIC).

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*Cay Dollerup is a regular contributor to Language International.*